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A VERY SHORT INTRO TO AFRO-PESSIMISM

LEXICON, NONPOLITICS CAPITALISM, FRANK WILDERSON, RACISM, SLAVERY, ULTRABLACKNESS

THIS IS AN INTRODUCTION WRITTEN TO PREFACE A NEW BOOK, *AFRO-PESSIMISM: AN INTRODUCTION*, PUT OUT BY RACKED & DISPATCHED. CHECK OUT THAT SITE FOR MORE INFO AND TO GET A FREE PDF OF THE ENTIRE BOOK.

PREFACE

In June 2017, a Black off-duty cop was coming to assist some other officers but as he approached them, the other cops, who were white, just saw a Black man coming toward them and shot him. One of the cops later justified this action by saying that he apparently “feared for his safety.” The Black cop’s lawyer said of the case that his client was “treated as an ordinary black guy on the street.”

Thinking about this incident, it appears that the Black cop seamlessly moves from being a force of structural white supremacy (as a uniformed cop) to being shot just for being Black. To help make sense of this, it is necessary to understand that anti-Blackness can emerge at any moment with the existence of Blackness. Anti-Blackness does not need any particular behavior to respond to; it is not a causal reaction. All that anti-Blackness needs to violently surface is the presence of Blackness; nothing needs to “happen.”

The following introduction—which is only an introduction as it relates to the entire book—is intended to provide a brief overview and channel into the writings of the Black authors who have come to define and fit within the framework of Afro-pessimism. *It is the essays themselves, not the Editors’ Introduction that follows, that are meant to serve as an introduction to Afro-pessimism.*

It should be emphasized that the intentions of this project are strictly non-academic—even anti-academic. The writers within Afro-pessimism are all part of academia (which is not to say the ideas of Afro-pessimism originate in academia), therefore this book is intended to remove the writings from behind their university paywalls so they are freely available to more people. It is also regarding accessibility that the following introduction attempts to restate in shorthand some of the theory and situate it within contemporary struggles. As someone who has nothing to do with academia, I wish to see the ideas of Afro-pessimism spread more widely so they might disrupt white tranquility and poison the narratives of Progress.

It is significant to note that my engagement with Afro-pessimism is as a non-Black person—none of my words should be taken as representative of it. Being non-Black, I am structurally positioned against Blackness and thus to feel a world built completely against you is something that is ultimately incomprehensible to me. My interest in Afro-pessimism comes not as an empathetic ally—as that position only reinforces the racial hierarchy—but as an enemy of whiteness (and as someone who lovingly wants to fight alongside friends). I believe that Afro-pessimism offers a framework to not only understand anti-Blackness but to also better comprehend whiteness. Racial categories exist relative to one another—obviously in grossly asymmetrical ways—and so understanding whiteness entails understanding anti-Blackness.

At the same time it is important to recognize whiteness as more than just an identity that one can simply abandon. The idea of being a traitor to one's race is important when non-Black but it is not enough. Whiteness is in the mortar that has constructed this world—which is of course supplemented by settler colonialism, patriarchy, heterosexuality, and so on. This is to say that the foundations and structures of the world we live in are inherently anti-Black; it is not only individuals and old fashioned racists that perpetuate anti-Blackness. Thus to maintain and reform the systems around us is to uphold whiteness, and to uphold or positively identify with whiteness will always be anti-Black.

It is an ongoing struggle experimenting with what it means to abolish whiteness and anti-Blackness, but it certainly involves listening to and learning from those whose lives are defined by systematic exclusion and murder. Afro-pessimism offers a fundamental challenge to concepts of race and racism and provides a framework through which anyone, including non-Black people, might understand their position in society and the struggles for a different world.

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

This reader is intended to be an introduction to the theory called Afro-pessimism. Collected in this volume are articles spanning three decades of thought, with topics ranging from police violence, the labor of Black women, and the slave's transformation following emancipation, to the struggles of the Black Liberation Army and elements of anti-Blackness in Indigenous struggles for sovereignty. Although the authors use differing methods of analysis, they all approach them with a shared theoretical understanding of slavery, race, and the totality of anti-Blackness; it is this shared understanding that has been called Afro-pessimism. Importantly though, rather than a fixed ideology, Afro-pessimism is better thought of as a theoretical lens for situating relations of power, at the level of the political and the libidinal.[1] Afro-pessimism, in many ways, picks up the critiques started by Black revolutionaries in the 1960s and 70s, elaborating their short-comings and addressing their failures. While we don't intend to explicate at great length the theory of Afro-pessimism here—this will be done by the articles—it may be helpful to start with a brief overview to give those readers without a context some footing with which to go forward.

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One of the central tenets of Afro-pessimism, which expands upon the erudite work of Orlando Patterson,[2] is a reoriented understanding of the composition of slavery: instead of being defined as a relation of (forced) labor, it is more accurately thought of as a relation of property. The slave is objectified in such a way that they are legally made an object (a commodity) to be used and exchanged. It is not just their labor-power that is commodified—as with the worker—but their very *being*. As such, they are not recognized as a social subject and are thus precluded from the category of "human"—inclusion in humanity being predicated on social recognition, volition, subjecthood, and the valuation of life.

The slave, as an object, is socially dead, which means they are: 1) open to gratuitous violence, as opposed to violence contingent upon some transgression or crime; 2) natively alienated, their ties of birth not recognized and familial structures intentionally broken apart; and 3) generally dishonored, or disgraced before any thought or action is considered.

The social death of the slave goes to the very level of their *being*, defining their ontology. Thus, according to Afro-pessimism, the slave experiences their "slaveness" ontologically, as a "*being for the captor*,"[3] not as an oppressed subject, who experiences exploitation and alienation, but as an object of accumulation and fungibility (exchangeability).

After the "nonevent of emancipation,"[4] slavery did not simply give way to freedom. Instead, the legal disavowal of ownership reorganized domination and the former slave became the racialized Black "subject," whose position was marked epidermally, per Frantz Fanon.[5] What followed was a profound entrenchment of the concept of race, both psychically and juridically. Formally, the Black subject was no longer a slave, but the same formative relation of structural violence that maintained slavery remained—upheld explicitly by the police (former slave catchers) and white supremacy generally—hence preserving the equation that Black equals socially dead. Just as wanton violence was a constituent element of slavery, so it is to Blackness. Given the ongoing accumulation of Black death at the hands of the police—even despite increased visibility in recent years—it becomes apparent that a Black person on the street today faces open vulnerability to violence just as the slave did on the plantation. That there has recently been such an increase in media coverage and yet little decrease in murder reveals the ease with which anti-Black violence can be ignored by white society; at the same time this reveals that when one is Black one needn't *do* anything to be targeted, as Blackness itself is criminalized.

With this understanding of slavery and Blackness, Afro-pessimism makes a critical shift in focus by moving away from the Black/white binary and reframing it as Black/non-Black, in order to deemphasize the status of whiteness and to center analysis, rather,

on the anti-Black foundations of race and modern society. In other words, “it is racial blackness as a necessary condition for enslavement that matters most, rather than whiteness as a sufficient condition for freedom.”[6] As a result, it is Blackness, and more specifically anti-Blackness, that gives coherence to categories of non-Black—white, worker, gay, i.e., “human.” Categories of non-Black must establish their boundaries for inclusion in a group (humanity) by having a recognizable self *within*. There must also, consequently, be an outside to each group, and, as with the concept of humanity, it is Blackness that is *without*; it is Blackness that is the dark matter surrounding and holding together the categories of non-Black. Experientially, subjects, even Black ones, can obviously find themselves with any myriad identities, but ontologically Blackness is still violently excluded from even the meager scraps given when recognized.

The distinction that Afro-pessimism makes is important because it problematizes any positive affirmation of identity[7]—as non-Black categories are defined against the Blackness they are not, this relation of race indirectly (and directly, e.g., white teens’ racist snapchats) sustains anti-Blackness by producing and sustaining racialized categories. Stated otherwise, “the violence of anti-blackness produces black existence; there is no prior positive blackness that could be potentially appropriated. Black existence is simultaneously produced and negated by racial domination, both as presupposition and consequence. Affirmation of blackness proves to be impossible without simultaneously affirming the violence that structures black subjectivity itself”[8]

Afro-pessimism departs with this understanding and illuminates the limits and failures of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, such as their reformist ideologies concerning progress and their disastrous integration with bureaucratic machinery. If, as Afro-pessimism shows, it is not possible to affirm Blackness itself without at the same time affirming anti-Black violence, then the attempts at recognition and inclusion in society will only ever result in further social *and real* death. Individuals can of course achieve some status in society through “structural adjustment”[9] (i.e., a kind of “whitening” effect), as has been superficially confirmed, but Blackness as a racialized category remains the object of gratuitous, constituent violence—as demonstrated by police murders, mass incarceration, urban planning, and surveillance (from COINTELPRO to special security codes at stores to indicate when Black customers enter). As Blackness is negated by the relations and structures of society, Afro-pessimism posits that the only way out is to negate that negation.

The challenges Afro-pessimism poses to the affirmation of Blackness extend to other identities as well and problematize identity-based politics. The efforts, on the part of such a politics, to produce a coherent subject (and movement), and the reduction of antagonisms to a representable position, is not only the total circumscription of liberatory potential, but it is an extinguishment of rage with reform—which is to stake a claim in the state and society, and thus anti-Blackness. Against this, we choose, following Afro-pessimism, to understand Black liberation as a negative dialectic, a politics of refusal, and a refusal to affirm; as an embrace of disorder and incoherence;[10] and as an act of political apostasy.[11] This is not to categorically reject every project of reform—for decreased suffering will surely make life momentarily easier—but rather to take to task any movement invested in the preservation of society. Were they not to decry every action that didn’t fit within their rigid framework, then they might not fortify anti-Blackness as fully as they do. It is in the effort to garner legitimacy (an appeal to whiteness) that reformism requires a representable identity and code of actions, which excludes, and actually endangers, those who would reject such pandering. This also places undo faith in politicians and police to do something other than maintain, as they always have and will, the institutions—schools, courts, prisons, projects, voting booths, neighborhood associations—sustaining anti-Blackness.

Afro-pessimism can also be used to critique prevalent liberal discourses around community, accountability, innocence, and justice. Such notions sit upon anti-Black foundations and only go so far as to reconfigure, rather than abolish, the institutions that produce, control, and murder Black subjects.[12] Take for example the appeal to innocence and demand for accountability, too frequently launched when someone Black is killed by police. The discourse of innocence operates within a binary of innocent/guilty, which is founded on the belief that there is an ultimate fairness to the system and presumes the state to be the protector of all. This fails to understand the state’s fundamental investment in self-preservation, which is indivisible from white supremacy and the interests of capital. The discourse goes that if someone innocent is killed, an *individual* (the villainous cop) must be held accountable as a solution to this so-called injustice. The *structural* reality of anti-Black violence is completely obfuscated and justice is mistook as a concept independent from anti-Blackness. Discrimination is indeed tragic, but systematic dispossession and murder is designedly more—it is the justice system—and no amount of imprisoned cops, body cameras or citizen review boards will eliminate this.

Furthermore, Afro-pessimist analysis exposes the often unacknowledged ways that radical movements perpetuate anti-Black racism. One such way is in the rhetoric repeatedly used that takes an assumed (historically oppressed) subject at its center—e.g., workers or women.[13] This conflates experience with existence and fails to acknowledge the incommensurate ontologies between, for instance, white women and Black women. To speak in generalities, of simply workers or women, is to speak from a position of anti-Blackness, for the non-racialized subject is the white, or at least non-Black, subject. For this reason, movements against capitalism, patriarchy, or gender mean unfortunately little if they don’t elucidate ontological disparities within a given site of oppression; and if they don’t unqualifiedly seek to abolish the totality of race and anti-Blackness. This is not to privilege anti-Black racism on a hierarchy of oppression, but to assert—against the disparaging lack of analysis—the unlivability of life for Black people over centuries of social death and physical murder, perpetuated (at varying times) by *all* non-Black subjects in society.

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Finally, we should add that alongside the valuable theoretical offerings of Afro-pessimism, this reader was also motivated by a desire to contribute to the efforts of bringing these writings out of the ivory towers of the academy, the place from which all these writings originated. We wish to remove the materials from this stifling place and see them proliferate among those in the streets and prisons. The topics discussed here may have origins in a place of lofty theory, but they deal with the constant realities of millions of people. We therefore find it imperative that these theories directly inform the practices of everyone desiring a life other than this one—while not simply resorting to the empty gesture of empathy.[14]

We must acknowledge the fact that non-Black people have a complicity in perpetuating anti-Blackness and face the necessity of abolishing all notions of the self and identity, practicing an anti-racism with a view toward the total abolition of the state, and developing an anti-capitalism aimed at the destitution of race. We take heed of the following statement: "If we are to be honest with ourselves, we must admit that the 'Negro' has been inviting whites, as well as civil society's junior partners, to the dance of social death for hundreds of years, but few have wanted to learn the steps." [15] Consider this project an opening sashay.

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[1] *Libidinal economy* – the economy, or distribution and arrangement, of desire and identification, of energies, concerns, points of attention, anxieties, pleasures, appetites, revulsions, and phobias—the whole structure of psychic and emotional life—that are unconscious and invisible but that have a visible effect on the world, including the money economy. See Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* and Chico, *cosmic hoboes* in "Further Reading." [All further references here will be listed in "Further Reading" unless otherwise noted.]

[2] *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*.

[3] See in this volume Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."

[4] See in this volume Hartman, "The Burdened Individuality of Freedom."

[5] *Black Skin, White Masks*.

[6] Sexton, "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery."

[7] This doesn't altogether eliminate the possibilities for organizing around identities. There are very real reasons why this is often necessary and groups are experimenting with ways of building autonomy that are also anti-essentialist and recognize the heterogeneity of supposedly static categories. One example is a negative affirmation of identity (the exclusion of cis men) in order to prevent any positive affirmation of another (a static notion of "womanhood"). See *LIES*, especially *Vol. II*.

[8] R.L., "Wanderings of the Slave: Black Life and Social Death."

[9] Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*.

[10] See in this volume Wilderson, "The Prison Slave as Hegemony's (Silent) Scandal."

[11] *Apostasy* – the total abandonment of one's belief in a religion, party, or cause; Warren, "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope."

[12] Needless to say, these institutions are also, in general, meant to create productive, governable subjects and, therefore, all those deemed non-normative are either assimilated—via their identity being formally recognized and incorporated into culture and society—or they are met with a similar murderous violence. This violence, however, is contingent upon a refusal, transgression, or crime, which is to say it results from some action or identity, rather than a constituent element as it is with Blackness.

[13] While not strictly in the purview of Afro-pessimism, it's important to note the ways that subject-oriented movements have included/excluded various identities over time—e.g., both discursively and explicitly, worker's movements mostly omitted women, and women's movements mostly omitted trans people. The point is not to decry exclusion, but to encourage moving destructively through and out of all such gross limitations to being.

[14] "[T]he effort to counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible. Yet if this violence can become palpable and indignation can be fully aroused only through the masochistic fantasy, then it becomes clear that empathy is double-edged, for in making the other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration" (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*).

[15] Wilderson, "The Prison Slave as Hegemony's (Silent) Scandal."

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